

I know of a rider who is training her horse in dressage in a bitless bridle. Her horse is going forward into a lovely soft outline and is working laterally and in collection, all without a bit! I have watched this combination many times and, since dressage is all about energy from behind into the bridle, I personally now question whether a bit is really necessary. Is a bridle such as this more comfortable for a horse? Should dressage training be more about acceptance of the bridle or acceptance of the bit?

- Name withheld by request.

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Most horses seem to be quite comfortable with a bit, provided that it fits (there's more to this than just measuring width) and suits them. Then there are the horses who never seem comfortable in any bit. For them, I think a bitless bridle is a wonderful alternative to conventional bridles.

I like bitless bridles for many reasons. A bit is not necessary for dressage training. It is perfectly possible to develop a horse's body, mind and spirit without using a bit. It is also possible to train to advanced levels without using a bit. However, a bit *is* required for dressage competitions.

I find a bitless bridle useful for quiet horses in their first few years of dressage training, even if their riders intend to use bits later on. It is easier for young horses that are still teething to focus on their work without the additional distraction of a bit. Three- and four-year-old horses are typically just starting out in their under-saddle work. Even if they've been well-developed on the longe and on long lines, they are still learning about balance and movement. They are still growing, changing shape and learning how to carry themselves, as well as how to carry a rider. It's best if they can do this without any extra distraction or confusion. The bit can be added later, when they are confirmed in their ability to balance and move well under a rider.

I've found a bitless bridle to be helpful to riders, too. When I teach horse-and-rider comfort clinics, I use it as a teaching and diagnostic device. (I use a treeless saddle for the same purpose.) Horses are often uncomfortable with their bits or saddles or both and, sometimes, their riders aren't aware of this until they see and feel how much more easily their horses move in a bitless bridle or treeless saddle. This doesn't mean that they should run out and buy either item, but it does give them a benchmark. They now know how their horses can move when they aren't made uncomfortable by tack.

I find that the bit is as useful a diagnostic tool for the rider as a bitless bridle is for the horse. Add a bit and you'll find out how balanced the rider is and if her aids are gentle and quiet. At the highest levels of dressage, the rider's aids should be subtle and precise. But at those levels, both rider and horse should be fit, strong, supple and responsive, and the horse should be ridden primarily from the rider's leg and seat.

In dressage competition, a bit is required at every level; a double bridle (two bits) is required at the upper levels. To my mind, this is less about testing the horse as it is about testing the rider's skills. It takes more finesse to use a bit gently than it does to ride without one, just as it takes more finesse to use two bits gently than it does to ride with just a snaffle. A double bridle requires a more sophisticated and adept rider, because the horse will react instantly to any roughness and any mistake on the rider's part. Similarly, a bit requires more coordination and sophistication than a bitless bridle, because the bit requires more of the rider in terms of both knowledge and technique. As always, it is still the rider's responsibility to ensure that the horse is comfortable and confident.

In the early stages, when you are just beginning to develop your horse's physique and mind and when you are working to achieve good basic control of your own balance, legs and seat, you and your horse will probably both be happier if you use a bitless bridle. When your skills allow you to "talk" to your horse using your body and balance, and you use the reins only to provide reassuring contact, you can begin using a bit. Your goal should be to have the horse continue to be as cheerful, energetic, eager, responsive and forward with the bit as he is without it.

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